

feeling that the cell block was getting overcrowded. I was bundled up again and carted back down to the van, but this time I was not gagged. After a longish journey we arrived at a hospital. I will never forget the look on my mother's face and the small crowd of family gathered to meet me. I was kept in the hospital for a week or two before release. It made quite a stir in the

local paper. Everyone said it was a miracle that I had survived.

The months have passed, and people no longer stop my mother in the street. On occasions passers by look at me twice, as if worried by some half forgotten memory, a face from the news. I have learnt to ignore them. I just pull my woolly hat down over my face.

St Valentine's Day

For nearly everyone else, whether successful in love or not, the 14th of February is St Valentine's Day. For me it has a different significance. On 14 February 1957 my mother killed herself. The causes and consequences of this event have made it the most important of my life. Though I have a BA in European Studies from Sussex and an MSc in, effectively, modern European history from London, for nine years I have been a cleaner. In the University of Reading I polish the floors of the Faculty of Letters and sometimes look out over the rabbit-nibbled grass at the library, where books I have written sit on the shelves.

My parents were doctors. My mother was the only child of a wealthy Scottish businessman. Her mother was, to say the least, a little odd. After a row at my birth in 1943 my mother never spoke to her mother again. My father was the son of a Presbyterian minister who had managed to get him a free place at a public school. My parents met as medical students and as young doctors they settled in a northern industrial town. They had many children, of whom I was the eldest, and took a prominent part in local affairs. A northern town in the 1950s was as rigidly stratified as France under the ancien régime. It consisted of the working class topped by a thin layer of interlocking patriarchies of industrialists, lawyers, doctors, etc. Our family differed from the other medical families. We children went to an ordinary elementary school instead of a prep school. We were the only children of graduates there. We did not usually play with the other privileged children. My father kept changing cars. He had about 30 in succession. My mother had only one—a small green Morris with the number DET 793. My father had frequent short holidays by himself.

Academic success was what mattered—the proof of worth, the badge of caste, and the path to heaven. Only in adult life did we realise that to fail an examination was not *The Sin Against The Holy Ghost*. Our parents were largely indifferent to us otherwise. They saw as little of us as possible. My father was rarely in anyway. Every holiday we were sent away to relatives. For the last few years of our mother's life the younger half of the brood lived elsewhere permanently. On her visits to them she was upset when some of them did not recognise her. Each time I returned from my paternal grandmother's I cried myself to sleep at night. Once I asked my mother, "Why don't you ever hug us or love us like other mothers?" "Love has to be earned," she screamed, "and you haven't earned it!" At school I had behaviour problems. Our mother never set foot in any of our schools. The task of placating angry teachers fell to my father. One of my last memories of my mother is of her telling me, about three months before her death, that I was driving her to an early grave.

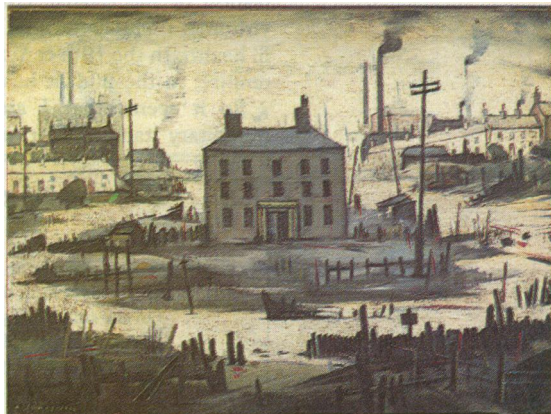
On that particular St Valentine's Day we all went to school as usual. Early in the afternoon my father, for the first time, collected me and those of my brothers still living at home. He told us that our mother had disappeared, almost certainly to try to commit suicide. There had been previous attempts. Five months into her last pregnancy she had put her head in the gas oven.

She had been revived. A year or two later she had taken an overdose and driven to a common six miles away. She had been found and her stomach pumped out. Imbalance was in the family. A maternal aunt and uncle had spent most of their adult lives in mental hospitals.

The next day we all went to school as usual. I was sent to the medical room. At about 11 am the headmistress came to tell me that my mother had been found drowned in a river 100 miles away. She had died at about 1 am. I cried but recovered enough to have my lunch. Within a week I was saying, "At least she could have waited until after my examinations."

The inquest resulted in a verdict of suicide while the balance of mind was disturbed. It reached the national press. We all went to school as usual. Then a group of boys chased one of my brothers down the street with, "What's happened to your mother?" My father was persuaded to drop, temporarily, the presentation of a front of normalcy to the world. He took us for a short holiday to London. When we came back he remarried. The bride was the head of the classics department at the oldest and most prestigious girls' grammar school in the district. The whole town rocked. Few men have two wives in five weeks in such circumstances. My father worried that his patients would leave his practice, but this fear proved groundless. They were all hooked on the serial. I offered my father to the other girls at my school: "You can have him at the next vacancy."

We were stigmatised with a hereditary tendency to insanity, and as doctors' offspring we were high profile. The situation had analogies with the later modern affliction of harbouring the HIV virus. My behaviour problems worsened. I held the school detention record and was suspended twice. The headmistress's suggestion that professional help should be sought was evaded. It was difficult for her to insist. She was the headmistress of a new grammar school created by the 1944 Education Act. My father was a well known local doctor and councillor with the self assurance of a public school education. She hoped that



"An island" by L S Lowry is reproduced by permission of Manchester City Art Galleries.

as an able pupil I would break the barrier to Oxbridge. So the result was not therapy but a pill every three nights. The help that would have been given to a miner's daughter was denied to me. I never discussed anything with my siblings. Each of us was locked in private unacknowledged suffering. We were isolated even from one another. Everything was swept under the carpet.

In the years that followed I was unable to resist or apply pressure in any one to one relationship. I could not express or respond to affection or hostility normally. This difficulty was aggravated by the mixture of messages transmitted by society. Clever women are told that it is their duty to manage—but all women are told to be deferential. On top of this there were several episodes of happenstance, as the Americans put it. By a coincidence I had my son in this same northern town. From the maternity ward I could see the tops of the trees round my old school. One of the sisters on duty remembered my parents.

Disastrous situations followed and compounded one another. Again and again pills were prescribed to press each successive catastrophe down and out of sight. A slow but continual loss of capital and earning power almost devoured my finances. It was impossible to cope with any human relationship. My failure was consummated and symbolised by permanent estrangement from my son. President Calvin Coolidge of the USA once boasted that he had never been hurt by what he had not said. My life has been wrecked by what I have not said. And other people have been hurt by my silence.

The past often came to mind. I realised that my mother's suicide attempts had shown the capacity to learn from experience. First she tried at home; then she went six miles away; finally she went 100 miles to prevent rescue. Often I wondered why for the last attempt she had chosen St Valentine's Day. In the 1990s I found out—a revelation worthy of *Oedipus Rex* or *Eastenders* was made by somebody else. It turned out that a valentine had arrived for my father. My mother showed agitation. My father threatened to leave her for six weeks or six months and charged off. She took it badly and carried out what was obviously a long thought out contingency plan. Her suicide was the result of hysteria and calculation. A sudden external trigger had made long term internal pressures intolerable. Immediately the past changed.

This new piece in the jigsaw made it necessary for me to reposition all the others, and a different picture began to take form. The motives for the previous attempts became clear, as did those for the discouragement of therapy. The proportion of my failure attributable to heredity fell. Those of our brood brought up by our parents have all experienced extreme difficulties. Those virtually adopted out have done brilliantly. Unintentionally we have provided a dramatic illustration of the relative contributions of heredity, environment, and treatment to incapacitating emotional ill health. In the 19th century the stiff upper lip built an empire; in the 20th it has filled the mental hospitals.

So it seems that I am no longer "guilty" of a hereditary taint. "Not proven" might be a more

appropriate verdict. On top of these discoveries came another shock. In my capacity as a cleaner I was moved to a part of the university where all the courses I had taken for my degrees were taught. Nothing could have brought home more shatteringly the wastage of my life in conventional terms. In a story called "The Necklace," by Maupassant, a woman spends her life charring to pay for a friend's diamond necklace which she had lost and had to replace quickly. When the huge debt has finally been paid off she finds out that the original necklace had been made of paste.

Perspectives changed. The implacable hatred I carried for so long for the mother who rejected me has been, partially at any rate, dissolved. What must it have been like for her, frightened of both confrontation and abandonment, slithering down into the abyss of disintegration and knowing not only that she was incapable of looking after her children but also that her inadequacy was damaging them? Now that I am estranged from my son for similar reasons I understand much better. It was worse for her. She was leaving her children to unknown fates. What must that last journey in DET 793 have been like? Stumbling in the dark towards the river? Apparently she looked at peace when she was found. Her death was really better than the prospect of a lifetime in a mental hospital or with a husband who let her know how he regretted the marriage but could not, given the customs of the time, divorce her?

What am I to do with this new knowledge, with my belated certificate of something like normalcy? I could try self assertiveness courses, Career Track seminars, counselling, etc, then I could apply for an ordinary middle class job. In practice this would be almost impossible. The weight of accumulated pressure is too great for me to concentrate on acquiring the skills, human and technical, to take such a course of action. The grip of the past is too tight. Whatever the causes, the damage is permanent. An effort to change and become normally employable except at a minor clerical level might result in a breakdown. As for close relationships of any kind, it is a case of "Wer allein ist, allein bleiben muss," to quote a German poet on our sixth form list. The risk is too high. I haven't the guts.

So what now? I will continue as before, grateful for the shelter of the grove of academe as I exert myself to ensure that the things that have happened to me do not happen to others. Paradoxically it was precisely because my background was privileged that I fell through the net of safeguards, checks, and services provided by society. But similar things happen to others because they are not. Needless to say I have long been a member of POPAN (Prevention of Professional Abuse Network), am on Sane's mailing list, and am trying to drum up support for the reforming bill, backed by Mind, before parliament. If I am not happy I am at least fulfilled. Like cancer campaigner Pat Seed and rape victim Jill Saward, I am a part of the British middle class tradition of using private pain for the general good. As the vice chancellor of this university says, "Dignis digna eveniunt"—you get what you deserve.

I will take St Valentine's Day off.

Here are the gnus

The lady from the *Lancet*
Was on the phone.
She said, "Good day, Professor.
On the subject of your paper
On bovine spongiform encephalopathy,
Do you think it's generally known
What captive exotic artiodactyls are?"

I expressed my sympathy
And said, "This has to do
With animals like gnus
Held in zoos.
If you are seeking an alternative,
Perhaps you might try *even-toed ungulates*.
At least, that's what *Chambers* states
(And they know what they're at).
Would you like to ruminate on that?"

—J G COLLEE, *Edinburgh EH6 4QE*